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ABSTRACT

The Burlington County (New Jersey) Special Services School District provides comprehensive services and programs to 700 severely impaired students from the ages of 3 to 21. To provide these students with a high quality education, the district has built modern, state-of-the-art facilities designed with the needs of the handicapped specifically in mind. Because the buildings were designed for the students' physical capabilities, the school programs are able to focus on helping students develop self-sufficiency in social, academic, and economic areas. This paper discusses the ways in which the design and organization of the school and its facilities support the special education effort. Among the areas addressed are relationships with the community, the centralization of functions, the "interconnected campus" concept, student control, accessibility, the use of multipurpose and flexibly-sized spaces, the vocational program, provisions for several types of therapy, the utilization of a full-year calendar, and the opening of the facilities to the community. Throughout, the paper emphasizes the idea that the educational environment can be enhanced through full coordination of all aspects of the programs, facilities, personnel, and community with student needs in mind. (PGD)

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SPECIAL PROGRAMS - SPECIAL FACILITIES

A MARRIAGE IN BURLINGTON, NEW JERSEY

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Facilities cannot exist for their own sake; they must be designed to implement and support programs. Only by merging these critical elements can a truly special education be provided to severely handicapped students. In New Jersey such a marriage exists at the Burlington County Special Services School District.

Our public countywide school district was started in 1972 to meet the educational needs of the county's most unique special education populations. Local school districts provide classes and services for most of their special education students. Children with more specialized needs attend consortium arrangement classes in various local school buildings. For those remaining students who are most severely handicapped or require highly specialized services as a result of their low-incidence disabilities, the Special Services School District is a viable option.

Unlike some public school districts that provide few services and are reduced to babysitting, we must do more. Our philosophy is to provide comprehensive therapeutic services and educational programs which meet not only the students' needs, but also take into account the needs of our kids' families and the surrounding community. This marriage goes far beyond the pairing of a facility and the programs it houses, but includes many interested parties. If we are to achieve lasting results the total involvement of families and communities is essential. This is the marriage to which we refer. This is the way to make an impact in the life of the child.

In the Burlington County Special Services School District, seven hundred severely impaired students from ages 3 - 21 receive comprehensive services and programs. The primary mission of the district is to provide the students with an education which equals or exceeds that received by their nonhandicapped peers. Today the district accomplishes this goal in modern-state-of-the-art facilities specifically designed with the needs of the handicapped in mind.

It was not always this way. I remember the early days of the district when we were in temporary facilities such as unused public school buildings and sprawling shopping centers that we converted into several educational areas. We made these conversions at the savings of hundreds of thousands of dollars to taxpayers by utilizing the services of vocational school students.

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Because the district gained the reputation for efficiently operating sound programs and services, the County Board of Chosen Freeholders approved construction of new facilities which opened in January, 1983. Since that time, the Governor, State Attorney General, Senators, Congressmen, and the Commissioner of Education have demonstrated their support through participating in district activities.

School programs focus on the capabilities of the students, not disabilities. It is what they can do that directs our individual plans for each student. By providing access and maximum mobility, the building itself helps to promote the child's self sufficiency. Programs and facilities enhance social skills, economic independence, and academic skill development. Once the physical barriers have been reduced or eliminated, the goal of self sufficiency in other skill areas can be addressed. Social skills can be developed now that the child is able to participate in social settings. Economic independence, employability, as well as the academic skills can be explored and mastered. Once again, we see that the design of the facility is "married" to our programmatic goals. By designing a building where all areas are fully accessible, we have enabled our kids not only to participate fully, but to minimize their frustrations and maintain their essential dignity and self-esteem as they do so.

In concert with this philosophy of normalization, we have implemented a successful program of mainstreaming activities. Students venture forth into the community as members of our bands, chorus, and athletic teams. Field trips provide additional, regular opportunities during which students can experience various aspects of community life. Vocational programs utilize on-the-job training in townships throughout Burlington County. Through the unique concept of "reverse mainstreaming," we provide regular, systematic contacts between our students and different segments of the community. Local high school groups perform for our students and volunteer to assist on a continuing basis. Fraternal organizations and civic service clubs enrich district programs through their personal participation.

Thus, we have expanded upon traditional mainstreaming concepts and created a true school-community bond. All of this has been done with a student population that typically experiences limited community contacts. Our students include over 300 multiply handicapped pupils including those who are orthopedically handicapped, blind, deaf, autistic, language impaired, neurologically and perceptually involved, and trainable mentally retarded. Additionally, we serve over 300 severely emotionally disturbed youngsters.

The needs of our students were foremost in my mind when the complex was designed. The modern buildings are among the finest facilities for special education in the country and can truly meet the needs of the children entrusted to us. Every aspect of the building and environment is designed as a teaching tool. Centralization has been adopted as the means of avoiding duplication of facilities. The building is totally multifunctional; each area must be employed to serve multiple purposes and program options. In terms of general layout, the district is organized on an interconnected-campus concept.

The Central Campus serves as the hub of the school district's activity, providing the most comprehensive vocational and career program, food services, physical education, swimming, and music programs. This area also houses the administrative and business offices and services. Located in this campus are the school store and the vocational evaluation center. The three connecting campuses house classrooms and special service areas. Students from pre-school to age 21 get a solid education in the South, East, or High School classrooms.

Each campus has wings around a center core. Students are assigned to wings by age, ability, and social characteristics. This flexible, dynamic system allows for appropriate integration of students. In our High School and East Campuses, smaller classrooms promote control of behaviorally disordered students. Observation rooms let parents and professional staff view classes unobtrusively so they can work consistently with the behavior management program. In the South Campus, with our multiply handicapped students, accessibility is a prime concern, so rooms are larger with sliding doors to the outdoor areas.

Far exceeding the requirements of federal law, our facilities have been designed with access for the handicapped uppermost in mind. Barriers such as stairs and ramps have been avoided through single floor design. Hallways and doors of extra width allow easy passage for children in wheelchairs. Strategically placed handrails assist students in moving more freely from area to area. Architectural refinements to help the visually impaired include carefully planned changes in floor texture and ceiling composition so that differences in feel and sound guide navigation. The variety of surfaces also contributes to the learning of a number of different maintenance applications. The facility itself promotes independence with features serving a multiplicity of functions. Designing a fully accessible pool was a special challenge. Specialized locker facilities and shower rooms complement the 25 meter pool, which is fully accessible via an extra wide ramp with handrails. Mechanical lifts are also available for some students. Even as all of these special innovations were accomplished, the basic pool configuration remained so that a variety of community groups can be served. A whirlpool room for hydrotherapy serves students with physical disabilities.

Throughout the facility, the innovative design provides specialized features that assist our students. Additionally, maximum flexibility for the future is built in through the use of demountable partitions. With the ability to change classroom configurations to meet the needs of students, we can allocate space as needed. Since our groups are organized into teams of four to six classes, we are able to close off individual classrooms for academic work even as we retain the ability to open up larger areas for whole-team efforts such as we have done in our Science Fairs and International Festivals. Movable walls in the gymnasium and multi-purpose rooms allow for activities and instruction of groups from six to six hundred.

As in any successful marriage, the elements must mesh and work in harmony with one another. Special education works most productively when programs and facilities are complementary. In Burlington, programs in place and envisioned determined the facilities which were designed. Subsequently, our facility has enabled us to modify and expand our program offerings. Academics challenge the child to make progress in basic skills. Modern technology is employed to focus on the traditional reading, writing, and arithmetic.

Vocational programs teach job skills to prepare students to become self-supporting members of society. These programs were designed based on the occupational outlook of the region and housed in versatile facilities which can be changed as job needs vary. For example, wiring from the ceiling down opens up the shop for multiple arrangement possibilities and different occupations as they become emergent. Emphasizing a cluster concept, each shop houses a variety of occupational programs for different levels. For example, food services has a public restaurant, basic food preparation, fast food, baking, waiter and waitress training, dishwasher experience, and short-order cooking. This concept in all shops prepares students for a variety of jobs. In another example, our warehouse serves as central supply and a training station to teach students a variety of occupations such as shipping, receiving, and inventory control.

The Burlington County Special Services School District provides a complete range of vocational programs for the handicapped including:

a. auto & small appliance repair

b. graphics & printing

c. carpentry & construction trades

d. metal & welding shop

e. health occupations

f. business/clerical/computer programming occupations

g. horticulture

h. food services

i. retail sales - school store

For our most severely disabled students, a specialized sequence of vocational experiences has been devised which develops the skills they need to successfully enter sheltered employment programs or programs which provide post-secondary training.

These include:

a. Worker Attribute Training

b. Prevocational

c. Avocational

d. Production Shops I and II

The sequence of activities offered in these shops covers the range from the most basic necessities such as developing sustained attentiveness to the task at hand all the way up to the fundamental manufacturing and packaging processes which are developed in our Production Shops.

Each and every one of our shops has been designed to help our kids obtain jobs in our community - either in a sheltered or competitive setting. I take great personal pride in our track record which indicates that we are meeting this goal beyond all expectations. Every student is capable of learning and developing vocational skills at some level. We focus on what the student can do. Very capable students participate in Work Study within the building and Cooperative Industrial Education at job sites within the community.

Beyond academics and vocational training, the complete special education facility must provide for the therapeutic needs of students. Once again, programs and facilities must mesh to meet the intensive needs of students who require very specialized assistance.

Speech therapy develops communication skills and language skills. Physical therapy helps kids improve their abilities to cope more successfully with their limitations. Occupational therapy gives students the skills to manage the tasks of day to day life. Sensori-motor stimulation enables students to use their senses more completely. Individual and group counseling guides students toward more positive patterns of behavior. Our music program allows children to develop their talents and serves as a bridge from the classroom to the community. Aquatic programs are both therapeutic and recreational in nature.

Since the facility is multi-functional in all aspects, it allows us to serve our students, as well as the community, on a continual basis. For our students, we offer an extended school year program which includes summer school so that severely handicapped students do not regress in their skill levels. A Weekend Respite Program assists students in developing social and recreational skills and supports the parents in the care of their handicapped child. This program which enables students to remain at the school for an entire weekend is designed not only to help them develop social skills and independent life skills, but also gives a much-needed break to parents whose responsibilities can be so all-encompassing. I truly believe that our efforts in this area have contributed to some families remaining healthy and intact. Our "marriage" encompasses many elements. Our kids' families needed help. We found a way to help them.

Evening programs open the facility to the entire adult handicapped population of Burlington County. The swimming pool functions as a true community resource. Therapeutic programs for arthritis, multiple sclerosis, and cardiac patients highlight an evening aquatic program. Additionally, many county high school swimming teams utilize the pool as a practice facility. Thus, our ties are strengthened and the district has forged a strong school-community bond.

As with all ventures, we realize that attention to the smallest details often spells the difference between success and failure. Soft music, which is audible throughout the facility, has proven to have a calming effect for many kids. Soft pastel colors also contribute to the pastoral atmostphere. The building supports the program in that it represents a beautiful and comfortable environment for our kids whose lives are so difficult. They <u>want</u> to come to school <u>everyday</u> because we meet their emotional needs as well as their educational needs. Naturally, the best results are achieved under these conditions.

In the Burlington County Special Services School District, we have joined together unique individualized programs with a flexible, dynamic facility. As with any marriage, the hard work of many is required. Dedicated staff, involved parents, and a supportive community have combined to provide an efficient, productive environment which is effective in meeting the needs of a wide variety of citizens. Just as we believe that our students can achieve and grow, we are likewise confident that we can meet the challenges of special education in the future.